

Communicating with Parents of Swim Team Participants:

Are Facebook Groups Effective?

Action Research in Education CI 515

Iowa State University

Melissa Schulze

April 2012

Introduction

Facebook was founded in February of 2004 as a way for Harvard college students to connect and has emerged as one of the most popular social networking sites in use today (Facebook, 2012). Since the development of Facebook, it has evolved and become more user-friendly for individuals and businesses alike. Many organizations are using Facebook to connect with their users and shareholders, teachers are using the medium to connect with parents and students and individuals are using it to connect with other individuals.

This research project is focused on Facebook as a communication tool with swim team parents. The two main topics addressed in this research are how parents are using this technology for information dissemination and secondly what are their perceptions of the effectiveness of using Facebook as a means of communication.

The Dialectic Action Research Spiral was utilized for this action research project (Mills, 2011). As illustrated below, an area of focus was identified, data was collected, then analyzed and interpreted, and finally an action plan was created.

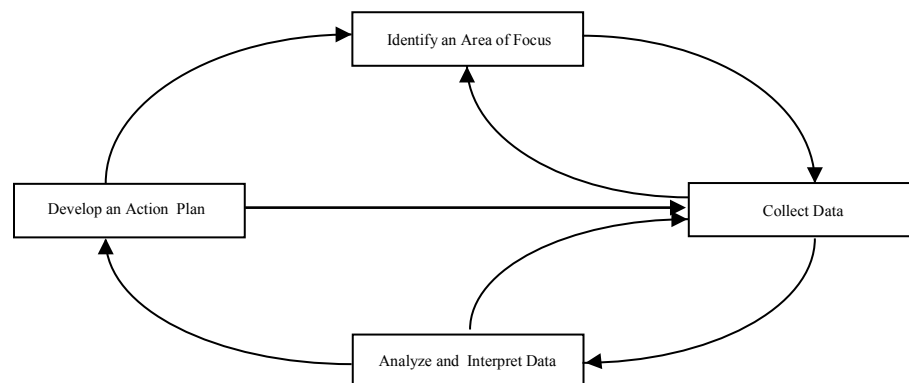


Figure 1. Mills (2011). The Dialectic Action Research Spiral. This figure illustrates the four main components of the action research spiral.

Area of Focus Statement

The purpose of this study is to describe if and how using Facebook as a means of mass communication impacts communication with parents of swimmers ages 6-17 on a rural USA swimming club team.

As a current swim coach, the board of directors and I are constantly trying to find ways to get information to families effectively and in a timely manner. When the team began many years ago initial attempts to get information out to parents consisted of monthly print newsletters which were put into a filing box for swimmers to pick up. As the team grew and e-mail became prominent, we moved to using this as our primary method to communicate with the families. E-mail provides us with an easy alternative to monthly newsletters and also allows us to send communication as needed instead of only monthly as was done via printed newsletters. Through observation, it has become more apparent that fewer and fewer people are actually reading the e-mails thoroughly, if at all. Frequently, after an informational e-mail has gone out, the coaching staff is bombarded with questions related to the e-mail which were actually answered in the e-mail. In an attempt to try and combat the flood of e-mails people are receiving and find another means of effective communication, we decided to create a Facebook group in January of 2011 to see if this might be a viable and effective way to communicate information with swimmers' parents. Originally, the Facebook group was used as a place to post comments about performances at swim meets and share pictures, more of a motivational tool than a communication tool. Thus, I have recently begun using the Facebook group as a means of sharing informational articles with families and important updates about swim meets, practices and expectations. The intent of this study is to

determine if using the Facebook group is a viable and effective way to communicate important and timely information with the parents affiliated with the swim team.

Research Questions

The initial research question was formed as a guide at the beginning stages of research. As the research continued and data were collected the more specific research questions were added to help direct the research towards more specific areas of interest.

What impact does the use of Facebook have on communication with swim team parents?

1. How are parent members of the swim team's Facebook group using the group?
2. What are the perceptions of the parent members on the usefulness of the Facebook group?

Review of Related Literature

Introduction

As a small, non-profit organization, a swim team has begun using a Facebook group in an attempt to communicate effectively and interactively with the parents of swim team participants. In order to determine if using a Facebook group is an effective means of communication with the parents of swimmers, this literature review focuses on communication theories both in terms of public relations and those related to educational settings. The literature review then continues to discuss who is using

Facebook and how educators and non-profit organizations are using it and other social media to interact with their audiences.

Communication

Communication is the act of using writing, speech or signs to exchange with others your ideas, opinions or thoughts. It is an essential part of everyday life and business. There are countless theories and principles of communication related to various topics, subjects and interests, however this literature review will focus on theories specific to public relations as well as those specific to educators.

Public Relations and Communication

Communication in the public relations field has evolved over the years from a one-way information dissemination practice to a more facilitating role encouraging dialogue between the intended audience and the organization (van Ruler, 2004). Van Ruler (2004) presents a communication model, called the Communication Grid, which indicates four different possible communication strategies in the public relations field (see Figure 1). After looking at various other research van Ruler (2004) concluded that although there are several other strategies employed as means of communication, the four strategies he suggests are the most critical for all types of communication.

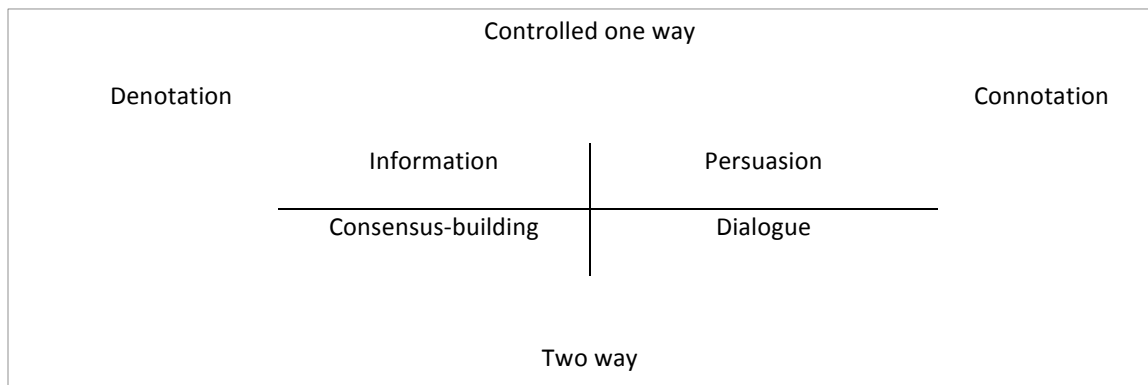


Figure 2. van Ruler (2004). The Communication Grid. This figure illustrates four communication strategies.

Dresp-Langley (2009) also conducted research related to communication within a large organization during a business meeting. The results suggest that effective communication between individuals must consist of ten clauses: sincerity, relevance, continuity, clarity, prudence, tolerance, openness, prompt resolution, balanced speech times and optimal timing in order for effective communication to result. The conclusion of Dresp-Langley's (2009) research showed that when one of the clauses is violated during communication, the communication becomes less effective. These clauses can be applied to communication not only within large organizations but also with small organizations as well as on a personal level. The characteristics stated are critical for effective communication regardless of the setting or audience and can easily be applied to communication between educators and parents.

Communication Between Educators and Parents

Teachers could benefit from using the communication grid of van Ruler (2004) or the suggested clauses of communication for effective communication presented by Dresp-Langley (2009) however, there are more specific models available for educators.

Once such model: LAFF Don't CRY, which recommends that teachers Listen, Ask questions, Focus on the issues and Find a first step while not Criticizing, Reacting hastily or Yakety-yaking (McNaughton & Vostal, 2010). Maring and Magelky (1990) also suggest that communication is greatly enhanced when warmth, empathy, respect, genuineness, listening and concrete practicality can be clearly observed. These models were focused on face to face communication with parents, however, both can be applied to phone conversations, e-mails and other forms of communication that are becoming more prevalent in the field of education. Despite being pedagogically specific, the communication theories mentioned prior have common themes which can be applied to almost any form of communication in any field.

As technology advances, there are more and easier ways of communication becoming readily available. These advancements are allowing teachers to communicate more frequently and more efficiently with parents. Written communication, face to face or telephone calls used to be the most common form of communication among teachers and parents until the evolution of e-mail. Although, e-mail is still the preferred form of communication with parents, social networks have given educators yet another way to connect with parents (Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008; Thompson, 2008).

Social Media

Social media has become a part of our daily lives both for personal and professional use. There are numerous social networking sites available to users such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Friendster, MySpace and Flickr, all of which have different attributes and varying foci. Businesses are using these sites to connect with their clients

while individuals are using social networks to connect with friends, acquaintances and organizations. People are using various forms of social media for multiple reasons, however, for the purpose of this literature review the focus will be on Facebook, its users and uses.

Personalities that Utilize Facebook

As of February 2012, Facebook had more than 845 million active users of which, 483 million are daily active users (Facebook, 2012). Facebook is available in over 70 languages allowing users from all over the globe to create accounts and interact with one another. According to Alexa Internet Inc. (2012), an internet usage statistics site, Facebook is currently the second most visited website in both the United States and worldwide.

As Facebook has become more widely used and accepted, there has been some research compiled on who is using the social network and how. The research that has been conducted is not only a collection of demographic statistics, but has also been focused on the personalities that utilize the site. Based on research by Ryan and Xenos (2011), Facebook users are more likely to be extraverted and narcissistic in terms of personality traits. People who are introverted and shy do not tend to use social networking sites in the same way as those who are extraverted. Research has shown that introverts are happier with the usage of Facebook, but also have fewer friends and display less personal information than those who are more extroverted (Hew, 2011; Nadkarni & Hoffman, 2012). Previous research that Ryan and Xenos (2011) analyzed

also supported this claim. Individuals use social networking sites the same way they tend to interact with individuals in face to face situations. For instance, if an individual is more shy in person, they too will be shy on a social networking site which is displayed by not seeking out “friends” or connections and providing less personal information than those who are more extroverted and outgoing.

Nadkarni and Hoffmann (2012) found that individuals use Facebook for two basic social needs 1) the need to belong and 2) the need for self-presentation. While Nadkarni and Hoffman (2012) claim there are 2 main uses of Facebook, Hew (2011) found there to be nine distinct motives for using Facebook. These motives include the need: a) to maintain existing relationships, b) to meet new people, c) to use because it is cool and fun, d) to make oneself more popular, e) to pass time, f) to express or present oneself, and g) for learning purposes. When comparing these two sets of findings, it is evident that Hew (2011) breaks down the motives more specifically than Nadkarni and Hoffman (2012), however, after more analysis, seven of Hew’s (2011) motives could become subheadings in one of the two categories presented by Nadkarni and Hoffman (2012). The only two motives that do not fit neatly into the social needs indicated by Nadkarni and Hoffman (2012) are the motive to: a) pass time and b) for learning purposes.

Although these findings are not surprising they do present an interesting challenge for non-profits or businesses aiming to use social networks such as Facebook for public relations and communication purposes. How do organizations reach out to the shy individuals who may not reach out to them?

Research by Cheung, Chui and Lee (2010) also support the claim that individuals with stronger personality identity participate on social networking sites more frequently. However, they also found that individuals use Facebook to get instant communication and connection with others. This is a positive finding for businesses looking to connect with their stakeholders in order convey information in a timely manner.

There is a fair amount of research on individual usage of Facebook as well as individual to individual communication via Facebook, however the research is still limited in other areas. Very little research can be found in regards to organizations' Facebook pages and how they are perceived and classroom use of Facebook. Although, both of these research topics are emerging as Facebook continues to be widely used.

Classroom Use of Facebook

As students are becoming more and more tech savvy, teachers are using social media to try and reach their students. Although the classroom use of Facebook is still fairly sparse, often due to district restrictions, Richardson (2010) suggests that one of the best ways to begin using Facebook with students is to create a closed or secret group for the class. Either is a group where only the members can participate and view the content presented in the group. Once the group has been established, the instructor can begin by posting a weekly discussion topic. The students then respond to the topic by predetermined days or times. Richardson (2010) also ascertains that this

type of discussion often helps shy students participate in class discussion because the anxiety of speaking in front of peers has been eliminated, creating a more genuine form of whole class discussion. The use of Facebook also allows for a richer discussion because students and instructors can link to related articles, posts, photos or websites, bringing in much more information to a discussion than possible in a traditional classroom setting. Mazman and Usluel (2010) support this type of use of Facebook use for educators by stating:

educational usage of Facebook for communication consists of activities such as enabling communication among students and their instructors, facilitating class discussions, following announcements about classes and courses, departments or schools, delivery of homework and assignments by teachers, informing about resources and links related to courses (p. 445).

Simply because students are spending large amounts of time on social networks, Mazman and Usluel (2010) also believe that these networks may have very powerful potential for use in educational and instructional contexts. Research focused on college students usage of Facebook by Park, Kee and Valenzuela (2009) suggests that students are using Facebook groups for four main purposes; socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking, and information. The researchers found that individuals who participate in Facebook groups are intentionally seeking information and tend to be more active on and off campus.

Contrary to Richardson (2010) and Park et al. (2009), Miller and Jensen (2007) believe that often students join a group to make a statement rather than to actively participate. This may be the case in terms of public groups, however, when groups are

established for an intended educational purpose with class expectations, there should be a difference in the amount of participation of the student.

Based on the research available, it is evident that classroom use of Facebook must be intentional and well directed in order to present learning opportunities for students. General use of Facebook does not lead to many enriched learning experiences but focuses on more social interactions and connections (Mazman and Usluel, 2010; Miller & Jensen, 2007; Park et al., 2009).

Research on how teachers are using Facebook to connect with or communicate with parents of students was not located. Although, many of the principles and ideas that are being implemented for students can be applied for use with communication with parents such as creating a specific group with intentional purpose.

How Organizations and Non-profits are using Facebook

Not only are educators using Facebook and other social networks to reach students, Non-profits and organizations are beginning to utilize social media in order to reach their clientele and engage them in meaningful ways. Although social networks are intended to promote interaction between users, organizations have found this to be a challenge and tend to use them to simply disseminate information (Waters, Burnett, Lamm & Lucas, 2009). Lovejoy, Waters and Saxton (in press) also concluded that the nation's largest non-profits tend to "use social media as a one-way communication channel" (p. 1). Larger companies have used Facebook for recruitment, communication and marketing purposes however the majority of social media uses are still one-way and

do not successfully promote interaction between stake holders and the organization (Orton-Jones, 2009).

Although many non-profits are still using social networks as a one-way communication tool, the American Red Cross has found a way to engage the public which has been successful at creating “conversations” and providing important feedback to the organization (Briones, Kuch, Liu & Yin, 2010). These researchers found that the Red Cross’s use of Facebook and Twitter provide the organization with far greater feedback and conversation than what they receive through a website. This is hopeful information for the creators of these social networks who claim the sites encourage interactivity and can be used for business practices as well as personal interactions.

The use of free social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook is creating opportunities for connecting individuals and this was not possible before because of limited monetary resources (Curtis, Edwards, Fraser, Gudelsky, Holmquist, Thornton, & Sweetser, 2009; Waters et al, 2009). Curtis et al. (2009) found that organizations with public relations departments were more likely to adopt social media practices than those without. Organizations with public relations departments may be utilizing social media more readily because it has helped make public relations practitioners’ jobs easier by providing them with an avenue to strengthen media relations and engage their audiences in conversations while reaching out to them (Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008). Despite the majority of research which indicates that social media is a one-way street it is clear that there are some organizations, albeit just a few, which have been able to capitalize on the potential of social networks for interactivity and dialogue.

Summary

This literature review does not indicate one clear and interactive way to use Facebook as an effective communication tool with swim team parents. It does however highlight communication theories that can be applied to social networking, as well as many other areas, to facilitate effective dialogue beyond simple information dissemination. It also highlights how educators are engaging students through social networking and the benefits that are being demonstrated. Non-profit organizations should begin to look at how educators are engaging their students using social networks such as Facebook and utilize these strategies to engage their stakeholders more effectively.

Although there is minimal research available on how parents and educators are using social networks to connect, the practices being implemented by educators with students and organizations with stakeholders can be used to determine ways to engage parents via Facebook and other networks. Using methods currently employed by educators with their students and non-profits such as the American Red Cross, using Facebook with parents of swim team participants can be much more than a digital information bulletin board. Based on the research on whom is using Facebook and how it is being used by non-profit organizations, it is clear that one of the greatest challenges of using social networks to communicate with a target audience is how to engage the users in a meaningful way that keeps bringing them back for more.

Intervention or Innovation

As an administrator for the site and a coach for the team, I began implementing different ways of trying to engage the members of the Facebook group. The intervention I implemented was to begin creating posts that linked to outside informational articles and topics. I also began creating more informative posts which provided the viewers with specific information for upcoming events and deadlines. This was done to see if and how these posts generated responses and interaction from the other members of the Facebook group.

Membership of the Action Research Group

The research was focused a small group of parents whose children, ages 6-18, participate on a swim team in a small urban area of Wisconsin. Each winter season, October through March, there are roughly 35-40 families involved in the team. These parents have chosen to register and pay a monthly fee for their children to be members of the swim team. The team is a parent run sports club affiliated only with United States Swimming. At the beginning of each season, the parents and swimmers are made aware of our closed Facebook group.

At the time of this research project there were 36 members of the team's Facebook group, 22 of which were parent members over the age of 18. All participants had either asked or were invited to join the team's Facebook group at an earlier date. For the purpose of this action research, members of the Facebook group were invited to take a short survey about using the team's Facebook group (See Appendix A). In addition to the survey, data collection was also taken on all posts made in the Facebook

group, regardless of who made the post or what their age was (See Appendix B). This was done with the consent from the swim team's board of directors.

Negotiations to Be Undertaken

Before beginning the research, I contacted the board of directors of the swim team to obtain consent for posting a survey on the team's Facebook group as well as collecting the usage data off of the Facebook group (See Appendix C). Consent was given verbally during the February board meeting. I also created a post in the group explaining what I was researching and asking for the members voluntary participation to complete the survey (See Appendix D).

Timeline

Phase 1 (January - February)	Identify an area of focus, develop research question(s)
Phase 2 (February – March)	Get authorization for research, Review related literature
Phase 3 (March)	Create data collection materials and implement data collection. Begin writing up action research paper
Phase 4 (April 1-8)	Collect and analyze data, begin action planning, write up findings
Phase 5 (April 9-28)	Complete action research project, create presentation
Phase 6 (May)	Share results with swim team board of directors and other coaching staff

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

Two forms of data collection were used during this research project. First, a 10 question survey was created by the researcher using SurveyMonkey. This survey was posted in the teams Facebook group with an introductory message explaining what the survey was for. The survey link was also sent via private Facebook message to all members of the group over the age of 18 (See Appendix E). The survey consisted of 10 questions focusing on the users' perceptions of how they used the Facebook group as well as content posted within the group.

In addition to the survey request, statistical usage of the Facebook group was collected on a tally sheet. Data were collected on all interactions done within the group from the groups' establishment on January 13, 2011 through April 1, 2012. The actions taken within the group were categorized into 5 main areas. The first category was "posts", all primary posts were tallied under this heading. An action was classified as a post if it was posted directly to the wall, not beneath someone else's post or comment. The next category was "comments," these were all comments made under another's initial post. "Likes" was the third category. Every time a group member clicked on the "like" feature, this action was tallied here. All photos were tallied separately as were links and events. Using these descriptions, data were collected for each individual based on how many posts they had made during that time, how many times they had "liked" a comment, and how many times they had commented under someone else's main post. Who posted photos, links and events was also collected.

In addition to the above data, I also collected random samples of various types of posts. To do this, I classified posts into 4 categories; informational, entertaining, pictures and links (See Appendix F). I randomly selected 5 posts of each type, created by a member aged 19 or older, and collected data on how many comments and “likes” the posting had received from members ages 19 and older.

Although Facebook is set up for individuals who are 13 years old and older, there are members of this group who do not meet these age requirements set forth by Facebook (Facebook.com, 2012). The research was focused on parents of swimmers, thus all data from swimmers under the age of 19 was eliminated from the both the survey results and statistical analysis.

Data Analysis

SurveyMonkey collects survey responses and labels them automatically using a numbering system based on the order of response submission. This allows the surveys to remain anonymous. Knowing this, I intentionally asked the participant to identify their age thus allowing me to delete all surveys from participants under the age of 19. After the underage surveys were eliminated, 15 usable surveys were left to gather data from. Features on SurveyMonkey were then used to analyze the results in two different ways. First, each individual survey was read and the information was entered into an excel spreadsheet so I was able to view the answers collectively (See Appendix G). After reading each individual survey, another feature was used to display the collective findings of the surveys’ in terms percentages (See Appendix H). This information was then organized into spreadsheets and analyzed.

The data obtained on how individuals are using the group was collected by hand on an Excel spread sheet using members' names. First, board members and administrators were identified and labeled. Then all members ages 18 and younger were coded red whereas the members ages 19 and over remained black. After all members were color coded, numbers were assigned to each individual. A Spreadsheet was created in order to help organize the information and identify statistical significance in terms of who creates what types of posts (See Appendix I). When comparing the two forms of data, the findings correlated with current research and produced interesting findings.

Findings

This section presents the data analysis findings related to the two research questions posed at the beginning of the study. Each question is addressed using a specific set of data.

How are parent members of the swim team's Facebook group using the group?

Data were collected from the creation of the Facebook group on January 13, 2011 through April 1, 2012. These data indicated that the bulk of the posts in the group were being made by the administrators. Of the 112 posts made during this time period by all members, 65.1% of the text only posts were made by administrators of the group. These 3 people include the creator of the group, whom only posted once, and the two head coaches who posted 72 times. While the rest of the parent members of the group only accounted for a total of 6 posts or 5.3% of the total posts during this time period.

When looking at only posts made by adult members of the group, 85 posts in all, the administrators accounted for making 84.7% of these. Although the percentage of posts made by parents was minimal, they were far more apt to “like” a comment than to actually post or comment under another person’s post. 72.1 % of the “likes” made during this time frame were done by parent members, this percentage excludes the three administrators. Although there is no way to determine if someone is reading a post without “liking” or commenting on the post, these findings suggests that parent members are reading posts but hesitant to comment on them or create their own posts. This lack of interaction supports the current research Orton-Jones (2009) which also found that the majority of social media uses are still one-way and do not successfully promote interaction between stake holders and the organization.

Data collected also indicated that the same five adult individuals are the most active on the team’s Facebook group, accounting for 82.5% of all parent activity within the group. These same 5 individuals account for only 45.6% of all activity within the group regardless of age. This suggests that adult members of the group are less interactive with the group than the swimmers, also suggesting they are using the site for informational purposes not interactivity.

The survey results support the statistical findings that adult members of the Facebook group are rarely posting comments within the group. 10 survey respondents or 67% claim to post less than once per month, this correlates to the 17 of 22 parent members who account for only 11% of the total posts in the Facebook group. Though there are more members of the group than who participated in the survey, the results

were similar, both indicating that a very small minority of members post comments within the group on a regular basis (See Table 1).

On average, how often do you "like" posts on the Swim Team Facebook group?		
	response %	response count
>once per week	13%	2
once per week	27%	4
twice per month	13%	2
once per month	33%	5
< once per month	13%	2
On average, how often do you post comments on the Swim Team Facebook group?		
	response %	response count
once per week or more	7%	1
twice per month	7%	1
once per month	20%	3
< once per month	67%	10

Table 1. Facebook Communication Survey results. This survey indicates the response percentage and response count from the 15 participants.

The above findings suggest that parents of swim team participants are using the team's Facebook page as a tool to view rather than interact. They are hesitant to post comments, links or photos in the group, but are willing to "like" others comments and posts to show they have read the information.

The findings from appendix F also suggest that currently the majority of postings made on the site are for entertainment purposes rather than informational purposes with 63.5% of all posts falling under the entertainment category while only 32.9% of posts were informative and 1 post posed a question. When comparing the random samples of entertainment posts with informational posts such as links, links generated more comments than interactive posts (See Appendix J). Although there are far fewer informational posts within the group than entertainment posts, they generated more

comments and interaction. This finding also supports the suggestion that parents are seeking out information within the team's Facebook group.

One of the most important findings was that although 73.3% of the survey respondents felt that the Facebook group was interactive in nature, only 55.2% of the interaction within the group comes from adult members. This suggests either a skewed perception of how much interaction these members are actually doing within the group or a varied definition of "interactive" in regards to using Facebook.

Based on both the statistical analysis and the survey results, it is evident that parents mainly use the team's Facebook group as a means of gathering information and are still hesitant to actively engage in the group. However, these findings also suggest that the parent members enjoy the entertainment aspect of the postings.

What are the perceptions of the parent members on the usefulness of the Facebook group?

In order to address this question, a short survey was administered to all willing participants in the Facebook group. Question 6 of the survey addressed this research question directly. Nine different types of posts were listed and participants were asked to rank each type of post as "not useful", "useful" or "very useful." "Not useful" was given a point value of 1, "useful" a point value of 2 and "very useful" a point value of 3. These values were then averaged out to find the mean rating of each post topic. Team announcement postings earned the highest mean score of 2.73. No members felt this type of post was "not useful" while only 4 felt it was "useful" and 11 felt it was "very useful." Practice changes and updates also received a high mean score of 2.67 making it

one of the more “very useful” topics for a post according to the participants. Table 2 shows all of the topics and how participants ranked them.

Using the scale below how useful do you find the following information when posted on the Swim Team Facebook group?				
	not useful	useful	very useful	average rating
links to articles	6.7 %(1)	46.7 %(7)	46.7% (7)	2.4
team announcements	0 (0)	26.7% (4)	73.3% (11)	2.73
practice changes/updates	0 (0)	33.3% (5)	66.7% (10)	2.67
meet updates	0 (0)	40.0% (6)	60% (9)	2.6
meet summaries from coaches	0 (0)	40.0% (6)	60% (9)	2.6
encouragement	0 (0)	46.7% (7)	53.3% (8)	2.53
Pictures	0 (0)	53.3% (8)	46.7% (7)	2.47
other important information	0 (0)	53.3% (8)	46.7% (7)	2.47

Table 2. Facebook Communication Usefulness Survey results. This Table indicates how useful participants rated various posting types. The number in parenthesis indicates the actual number of participants that chose this rank for each topic.

Participants were also asked if they felt the Facebook group was entertaining or informative or both. Overwhelmingly, respondents felt the group was both informative and entertaining. See Table 3 for all responses. This is an interesting perception from the participants when compared to actual percentages of posts made by members. Data collected indicate the majority of posts were entertaining, while only 32.9% were informative posts. Based on these findings the perceptions of the Facebook groups members do not correlate with the actual statistics that were collected.

The last question of the survey asked participants to provide information about what they would like to see posted in the Facebook group. Three themes emerged from this question. The first was related to providing more information. Of the 15 respondents, 7 responded with ideas for providing more information to members. Participant 15 indicated “more articles and tips or pointers for swimmers” while

participant 4 stated “it would be good place to have updates from board meetings so everyone can be current on events...” Another participant asked for “more links to articles about nutrition, parent coaching, etc. They are informative” (P8). These responses indicate the importance that people place on using the Facebook group as a means of information dissemination.

Both the data collected on how members are using the Facebook group, as an information gathering tool, and their perceptions of how they are actually using it are critical in determining future actions to be undertaken by the group administrators. This data is also fundamental in helping guide future research in the area of using Facebook as a communication tool, providing insight into how and what to post within a Facebook group.

Action Planning

Based on the results of the data collected there are several steps that will be taken to further enhance the use of the Swim Team’s Facebook group. In addition to these action steps several ideas emerged for future research in this area that would benefit not only swim teams, but other youth sports organizations using Facebook.

Action Steps

The first step that seemed to emerge as a need was to have more members in the group. Moving forward, there will be a greater push to get parents and swimmers to join the teams Facebook group. During an average swim season, there are 40-45 families on the team, however, only a small percentage are members of the Facebook

group. By encouraging more members this may lead to more interaction between a larger percentage of members than what was seen in the research.

Based on the participants survey suggestions such as “It would be a good place to have updates from board meetings so everyone can be current on events,” the second action step taken will be to include more informational posts about team meetings, board meetings and team information (P 4). Other survey participants also indicated a desire to have more informational posts made related to meet updates, practice schedules, practice changes and more articles and tips or pointers for swimmers and parents (P8, P15, P16, P20). However, based on these same participant responses, there was still a desire for posts to be entertaining as well as informative. Several participants indicated that they wished to see more pictures posted within the group and more postings that were motivational for the athletes.

Both the findings of this research study and prior research concluded that non-profit organizations have a difficult time using Facebook as an interactive tool and continue to mainly use it for information dissemination (Lovejoy et al., in press, Waters et al., 2009). To address this lack of interactivity, the next major action step will be to try and engage the users more actively in the group. This will be a two-step process. The first step will begin with posting informational links and articles and following them up with specific questions in an attempt to ignite interaction. An example of this would be using an article that addresses the choice of drinking Gatorade over water. Instead of posting the link to the article and simply asking “Gatorade or water?” there would then be more in-depth follow-up questions. These would include questions such as “Why do you choose that?”, “Is there a time to drink Gatorade over water? If so, when

is that time?” Additional questions may include “How will you look at your next drink selection at a swim meet?” or “How often do you choose Gatorade over water? Why?” The next step that will be taken to engage the Facebook group users will be to post weekly topics for discussion. Ideas for discussion topics include “What do you bring to a swim meet?” This would encourage veteran swim parents to answer with what they bring to a swim meet, while also informing new swim parents about what to bring. It may also encourage new swim parents to follow up with questions of their own. This type of discussion would be both interactive and informative than just posting a list of what should be brought to a swim meet. Discussion topics like this would be similar to what the Red Cross does to successfully engage their Facebook users in dialogue (Briones et al., 2010).

Future Research

After completing the above action steps it will be vital for the effectiveness of this Facebook group to continue evaluating its usage and members perceptions. I will continue to implement an annual survey to ensure that the needs of the groups’ current members are being met. The survey will be posted in the group asking for voluntary completion. The results will continue to help guide the administrators in a direction that meets the needs and wants of the current group members while continuing to encourage interaction between members and administrators.

The findings of this study have brought forth some interesting questions that should be addressed to also help assess the best uses for a closed Facebook group. One major topic for future research would include the differences between how swim team

or other youth sports participants are using Facebook groups compared to how their parents use the group. There is little to no research on how youth sports organizations are using Facebook groups to communicate with their members and parents. More information on this and the findings would be extremely beneficial for non-profit sports clubs trying to use Facebook as a means of communication and interaction. Comparing how minors use Facebook with how their parents use Facebook may lead to more insight on how to create groups and sites in Facebook that are more interactive for all ages while meeting the members specific needs of entertainment, engagement and information gathering.

Another suggested area for future research would include how members of groups want to be engaged in Facebook groups. Are they content using the groups as information gathering sites or do they wish to be more actively engaged? Perhaps the lack of interactivity between organizations and members is intentional on the members' part while organizations are trying to attain something that is not desired by the stakeholders. Research in this area may help bridge the gap between the lack of interactivity from members and the desire of interactivity from organizations.

The findings of this action research have led to some clear directives on how the swim team's Facebook group needs to be used both as an interactive and entertainment tool for communication with parents. It will continue to be a challenge to meet the needs and desires of the Facebook groups' members in meaningful and engaging ways that will also keep them coming back for more information and interaction.

References

- Alexa Internet Inc. (2011). *Alexa top 500 global sites*. Retrieved from <http://alexa.com/siteinfo/facebook.com> Accessed 03/20/12.
- Briones, R. L., Kuch, B., Liu, B. F., & Jin, Y. (2010). Keeping up with the digital age: How the American Red Cross uses social media to build relationships. *Public Relations Review*, 37(1), 37-43.
- Cheung, C. M., Chiu, P., & Lee, M. K. (2010). Online social networks: Why do students use Facebook? *Computers in Human Behavior*, 27(4), 1337-1343.
- Curtis, L., Edwards, C., Fraser, K. L., Gudelsky, S., Holmquist, J., Thornton, K., & Sweetser, K.D. (2010). Adoption of social media for public relations by nonprofit organizations. *Public Relations Review*, 36(1), 90-92.
- Dresp-Langley, B. (2009). The communication contract and its ten clauses. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 87(3), 415-436.
- Eyrich, N., Padman, M. L., & Sweetser, K. D. (2008). PR practitioners' use of social media tools and communication technology. *Public Relations Review*, 34(4), 412-414.
- Facebook. (2012). Retrieved from <http://newsroom.fb.com/content/default.aspx?NewsAreaId=22>
- Ferlazzo, L. (2011). Involvement or engagement. *Educational Leadership*, 68(8), 10-14.

Hew, K. F. (2011). Students and teachers use of Facebook. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 27(2), 662-676.

Lovejoy, K., Waters, R.D., Saxton, G.D. (in press). Engaging stakeholders through Twitter: How nonprofit organizations are getting more out of 140 characters. *Public Relations Review*.

Maring, G. H., & Magelky, J. (1990). Effective communication: Key to parent/community involvement. *The Reading Teacher*, 43(8), 606-607.

Mazman, S. G., & Usluel, Y. K. (2010). Modeling educational usage of Facebook. *Computers & Education*, 55(2), 444-453.

McNaughton, D., & Vostal, B. R. (2010). Using active listening to improve collaboration with parents: The LAFF don't CRY strategy. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 45(4), 251-256.

Miller, S. E., & Jensen, L. A. (2007). Connecting and communicating with students on Facebook. *Computers in Libraries*, 27(8), 18-22.

Mills, G. E. (2011). *Action Research: A Guide for the Teacher Researcher* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education Inc.

Nadkarni, A., & Hofmann, S. G. (2012). Why do people use Facebook? *Personality and Individual Differences*, 52(3), 243-249.

Orton-Jones, C. (2009, March). How Facebook can be used as a serious professional tool.

Financial Management, 1, 21.

Park, N., Kee, K. F., & Valenzuela, S. (2009). Being immersed in social networking environment: Facebook groups, uses and gratifications, and social outcomes.

Cyberpsychology and Behavior, 12(6), 729-733.

Richardson, W. (2010). Social networks: Facebook, Ning, connections, and communities.

Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for the Classroom (pp.

131-139). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Ryan, T., & Xenos, S. (2011). Who uses Facebook? An investigation into the relationship between the big five; shyness, narcissism, loneliness and Facebook Usage.

Computers in Human Behavior, 27(5), 1658-1664.

SurveyMonkey. (2012). Retrieved from <http://surveymonkey.com>

Thompson, B. (2008). Characteristics of parent teacher e-mail communication.

Communication Education, 57(2), 201-223.

Van Ruler, B. (2004). The communication grid: An introduction of a model of four communication strategies. *Public Relations Review*, 30(2), 123-143.

Waters, R. D., Burnett, E., Lamm, A., & Lucas, J. (2009). Engaging stakeholders through social networking: How nonprofit organizations are using Facebook. *Public Relations Review*, 35(2), 102-106.

Appendix A: Survey to Participants

1. What is your age?

- ☐ What is your age? 15 and under
- ☐ 16-18
- ☐ 19 and over

2. How long have you been a member of the Tiger Sharks Facebook group?

- ☐ 0-2 months
- ☐ 3-4 months
- ☐ 5-6 months
- ☐ more than 6 months

3. On average, how often do you visit the Tiger Sharks Facebook group?

- ☐ every day
- ☐ more than once per week
- ☐ once per week
- ☐ twice per month
- ☐ once per month
- ☐ less than once per month
- ☐ only when a notice appears on my Facebook homepage that a new post has been made

4. On average, how often do you "like" posts on the Tiger Sharks Facebook group?

- ☐ more than once per week
- ☐ once per week
- ☐ twice per month
- ☐ once per month
- ☐ less than once per month

5. On average, how often do you post comments on the Tiger Sharks Facebook group?

- ☐ one per week or more
- ☐ twice per month
- ☐ once per month
- ☐ less than once per month

6. Using the scale below, how useful do you find the following information when posted on the Tiger Sharks Facebook group? Using the scale below, how useful do you find the following information when posted on the Tiger Sharks Facebook group?

	not useful	useful	very useful
links to articles	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
team announcements	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
practice changes/updates	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
meet updates	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
meet summaries from coaches	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
encouragement	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
pictures	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
other important information	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. How would you categorize the majority of the postings in the Tiger Sharks Facebook group?

- ☐ entertaining
- ☐ informative
- ☐ both entertaining and informative

Other (please specify)

8. Do you feel the Tiger Sharks Facebook group encourages your interaction?

☐ yes

☐ no

Please comment

9. How would you prefer to receive updates about schedule changes, meet information or other important information? Please check all that apply

☐ via posting on our team website

☐ via the team Facebook group

Other (please specify)

10. Is there anything else that you would like to see posted in the Tiger Sharks Facebook group on a regular basis?

Done

Powered by **SurveyMonkey**
Create your own [free online survey](#) now!

Appendix B: Coded Data Collection Spreadsheet

Members	Posted	commented under another post	"Liked" a post	shared a photo	shared a link	Posted an Event
Admin 1	43	65	10	5	3	
1	3	18	15			
Admin 2	1	2		1		
2	1	2			1	
3			4			
Board Member 1	1		19	1		
4	2	5	14			
5	1	15				
Board Member 2	4	9	7	15		1
Board Member 3	3	6	2	4		
6		2	1			
Admin 3	29	33	24		1	
7		2	24			
8	3	1				
9			2			
10		1	9			
11		6	4	5		
12		2	2			
13		1				
14	1	57	7			
15		4	6			
16		2				
17	8	53	13	1		
18	2	11	11	1		
19						
20	1	5	9			
21		1				
22						
23	1	1				
24	10	46	12			
25						
26			1			
27						
28						
29						
30	1	2				

Totals under 19	27	208	74	2	0	0
Totals over 19	85	140	122	31	5	1
Grand Total	112	348	196	33	5	1
under 19 percentage	24.10%	59.80%	37.80%	6.00%	0.00%	0.00%
over 19 percentage	75.80%	40.20%	62.20%	93.90%	100.00%	100.00%

Appendix C: Letter to Board of Directors

February, 2012

Board of Directors:

I am currently enrolled in a Master's of Education program through Iowa State University. This semester I am taking a class on action research. Since I am not currently working in a classroom, I would like to research how our swim team is utilizing our Facebook group. The research would consist of two main types of data collection, both of which would be coded so no member's names would be used in the reporting process. These types of data collection include:

- Usage statistics from the creation of the Facebook group through April 1, 2012.
- A survey link that would be posted in the Facebook group which members could voluntarily take
- A message sent to all members of the group over the age of 19, asking for their participation in completing the survey

I would like to begin this research once given your approval.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to ask. Thank you for your consideration.

Melissa Schulze

Appendix D: Post in Facebook Group Seeking Participants

Posted March 24, 2012

Hello everyone! As many of you know I am working on getting my Masters Degree in Education. This semester I am enrolled in an action research class. My research focused is on using Facebook as a means of communication with parents of athletes. In addition to collecting data about how we are using our Facebook group, I have also created a survey looking for feedback. Please take a few minutes and fill out the 10 question survey linked below. The survey is on a volunteer basis and you will remain anonymous. The survey will be posted until April 1, 2012. Thanks so much! See you all back in the pool soon! <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/GSVTJLV>

Appendix E: Private Message Sent to Facebook Group Members

Sent March 28, 2012

Hello! I am sending you this message because I need your help! I am working on trying to finish up a research class this semester! My research is focused on the effectiveness of Facebook as a communication tool with parents of swimmers. You all are members of the Swim Team's Facebook group and I need some survey responses related to the group. If you could take a few minutes to answer the short 10 questions survey that is linked below, I would really appreciate it. I am trying to get all my data collected no later than this Sunday, April 1, 2012. I do not know who has currently responded to the survey, but THANK YOU if you have already done so. If you have questions, please feel free to ask. All survey results remain anonymous and are not linked to your name or account! Here is the link <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/GSVTJLV>

Appendix F: Chart of Types of Posts Made

Types of posts? (All ages)		
----------------------------	--	--

Type of Post	# of posts of this type	Percentage
Entertaining	76	67.80%
Informative	32	28.50%
Question	4	3.50%
Total	112	

19 and over group

Type of post	# of posts of this type	Percentage
Entertaining	54	63.50%
Informative	28	32.90%
Question	3	3.50%
Total	85	

18 and under group

Type of post	# of posts of this type	Percentage
Entertaining	22	81.40%
Informative	4	14.80%
Question	1	3.70%
Total	27	

Appendix G: Spreadsheet of Survey Results

Q #	1	2	3	4	5	7	8	9	10
R e s p #									
1	under 15	> 6month	only when notice appears	once per month	< once per month	informative	yes	facebook	more links to olympic swimmer news and such :) cool swimming facts too.
2	over 19	> 6month	> once per week	once per month	< once per month	entertaining	yes	facebook	highlights of swimmers of the month...or swimmer of the week...something that would be very motivational for the younger "quieter" more soft spoken swimmers.
3	over 19	> 6month	once per week	once per week	< once per month	both	yes	all 3	nothing at this time
4	over 19	> 6month	only when notice appears	once per month	< once per month	both	yes	email and facebook	It would be good place to have updates from board meetings so everyone can be current on events. Posting from swim meets results
5	over 19	> 6month	every day	>than once per week	twice per month	both	yes	all 3	N/A
6	over 19	> 6month	once per week	once per week	once per month	both	yes	all 3	encouragement for the swimmers! This is a great tool & motivator
7	over 19	> 6month	twice per month	once per month	< once per month	informative	yes, some older swimmers post silly comments sometimes	all 3	no
8	over 19	> 6month	only when notice appears	once per month	< once per month	both	no	e-mail and facebook	More links to articles about nutrition, parent coaching, etc. They are very informative. I would also like to see a Twitter feed so I can follow and get updates through Tweets
9	under 15	> 6month	more than once per week	<once per month	< once per month	both	yes	email	none
10	16-18	> 6month	only when notice appears	twice per month	twice per month	both	yes	website and facebook	More pictures if we could!
11	under 15	> 6month	only when notice appears	<once per month	<once per month	informative	yes	website and facebook	nope

1 2	over 19	> 6mon th	only when notic appears	<once per month	<once per month	both	no, we are out of the loop	facebook	no
1 3	over 19	> 6mon th	> once per week	> than once per week	once per month	both	yes	email and website	picture, more team information
1 4	over 19	> 6mon th	only when notice appears	<once per month	< once per month	entertaining	no email	no	
1 5	over 19	> 6mon th	once per week	twice per month	< once per month	both	yes	email and facebook	more pictures and meet updates
1 6	over 19	> 6mon th	only when notice appears	once per week	< once per month	both	yes	email	swim schedules or changes in the swim schedules
1 7	over 19	> 6mon th	once per week	twice per month	once per month	entertaining	no	email and facebook	Personally I would like to see picture and comments relating to how the team is doing. Since I am an alumni I would like to stay current and up to date on how the team is progressing.
1 8	over 19	> 6mon th	every day	once per week	< once per month	both	yes	all 3	It is pretty good as is
1 9	16-18	> 6mon th	more than once per week	once per month	twice per month	both	yes	email and facebook	quote of the week!
2 0	over 19	> 6mon th	more than once per week	once per month	>once per week	both	yes	email and facebook	more articles and tips or pointers for swimmers

Appendix H: Survey Results Percentages

Question	answer choices	response %	response count
What is your age			
	15 and under	0	0
	16-18	0	0
	19 and over	100%	15

How long have you been a member of the Swim Team Facebook group?			
		response %	response count
	0-2 months	0%	0
	3-4 months	0%	0
	5-6 months	0%	0
	> 6 months	100%	15

On average how often do you visit the Swim Team Facebook group?			
		response %	response count
	everyday	13%	2
	>once per week	20%	3
	once per week	27%	4
	twice per month	7%	1
	once per month	0%	0
	<once per month	0%	0
	only when Facebook notifies me	33%	5

On average, how often do you "like" posts on the Swim Team Facebook group?			
		response %	response count
	>once per week	13%	2
	once per week	27%	4
	twice per month	13%	2
	once per month	33%	5
	< once per month	13%	2

On average, how often do you post comments on the Swim Team Facebook group?			
		response %	response count
	once per week or more	7%	1
	twice per month	7%	1
	once per month	20%	3
	< once per month	67%	10

Using the scale below how useful do you find the following information when posted on the Swim Team Facebook group?					
	not useful	useful	very useful	average rating	response count
links to articles	6.7 %(1)	46.7 %(7)	46.7% (7)	2.4	15
team announcements	0 (0)	26.7% (4)	73.3% (11)	2.73	15
practice changes/updates	0 (0)	33.3% (5)	66.7% (10)	2.67	15
meet updates	0 (0)	40.0% (6)	60% (9)	2.6	15

meet summaries from coaches	0 (0)	40.0% (6)	60% (9)	2.6	15
encouragement	0 (0)	46.7% (7)	53.3% (8)	2.53	15
pictures	0 (0)	53.3% (8)	46.7% (7)	2.47	15
other important information	0 (0)	53.3% (8)	46.7% (7)	2.47	15

How would you categorize the majority of the postings in the Swim Team Facebook group?

	response %	response count
entertaining	20.00%	3
informative	6.70%	1
both entertaining and informative	73.30%	11
other, please sepcify	6.70%	1

Do you feel the Swim Team Facebook group encourages your interactcion?

	response %	response count
yes	73.30%	11
no	26.70%	4

How would you prefer to receive updates about schedule changes, meet information or other important inforamtion?

	response %	response count
e-mail	86.70%	13
posting on team website	33.30%	5
facebook group	80.00%	12

Appendix I: Chart of Who is Making Posts

Who is making posts?

	# of posts of this type	Percentage
Over 19 data		
Posts made by board members	8	9.40%
Post made by admins	73	85.80%
posts made by members	4	4.70%
Total Posts	85	

	# of posts of this type	Percentage
All ages		
Posts made by board members	8	7.10%
Post made by admins	73	65.10%
posts made by members	31	27.60%
Total Posts	112	

Appendix J: Random Sampling of Types of Posts

5 Random Samples of various types of posts

Informational

1. 0 comments, 1 like
2. 0 comments, 0 like
3. 0 comments, 0 like
4. 0 comments, 1 like
5. 0 comments, 1 like

Entertaining

1. 6 comments, 3 like
2. 1 comment, 0 like
3. 0 comments, 3 like
4. 4 comments, 2 like
5. 0 comments, 8 likes

Pictures

1. 0 comments, 1 like
2. 0 comments, 0 like
3. 0 comments, 0 like
4. 4 comments, 2 like
5. 0 comments, 2 like

Links

1. 15 comments, 1 like
2. 1 comment, 0 like
3. 0 comments, 0 like
4. 2 comments, 0 like
5. 2 comments, 0 like